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The Risks We Face in Nicaragua

Consequences of Expanded War Could Spell Disaster for All

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Since late 1981 the Reagan Administration has been organizing, funding and sponsoring a covert war against the government of Nicaragua. Now the Administration is seeking to expand that war, which may bring the armies of Nicaragua and neighboring Honduras into direct confrontation. The simultaneous announcement of naval maneuvers in the area threatens even closer involvement of U.S. military personnel in the Central America conflict.

The Administration claims that covert action against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua is justified because it is substantially involved in aiding Salvadoran rebels' efforts to topple that country's government. Ten days ago we visited Nicaragua and El Salvador in an attempt to assess the legitimacy of those claims.

We found no evidence that arms shipments to the Salvadoran rebels have been interdicted as a result of the U.S.-sponsored covert war. In fact, we have serious doubts that arms interdiction was ever the Administration's purpose in launching the covert war.

We did find that this "secret war" is far more extensive than the Administration has led the American public to believe, and that the aim of the U.S.-supported insurgents is not to stop the arms flow but to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

While the Reagan Administration's rhetoric paints the Sandinistas as aggressors in Central America, Nicaragua is the only country being invaded by an exile army backed by a great foreign power. This became clear in conversations with Nicaraguan and U.S. officials that revealed the scope of activities staged by the counter-revolutionaries, or *contras*. Rebel units, many led by officers of Anastasio Somoza's defunct National Guard, are concentrated in the north along the Honduran border, and have penetrated deep inside Nicaraguan territory as well as along its coastlines. Their targets have included bridges, tobacco warehouses, construction vehicles and power lines—in short, not military installations relevant to stopping arms traffic but economic targets whose destruction is intended to weaken the Sandinistas and increase popular disaffection with the regime.

Evidence of the U.S. hand in the sabotage is tangible—M-16 carbines, Claymore mines labeled with instructions in English: "Face

Toward Enemy"—and some of it—magnetic flashlights filled with C-4 plastic explosives—recalls the stuff of spy novels.

The results already have been costly in lives and property. According to U.S. Embassy figures, 600 civilians have died in the war. Less than a year ago the Nicaraguan government estimated the dead at 200. Conservative estimates place the economic costs at \$50 million, an enormous strain on an economy still struggling after four years to recuperate from a civil war.

Now regional war is the central danger. Troops of the Honduran government regularly back the *contra* forces with mortar fire, supplies and logistical support. According to reliable testimony that we received, U.S. aid to the Honduran armed forces encourages their participation in support of the *contra* activities. Indeed, many Nicaraguan officials believe that the purpose of this campaign is to provoke their army into crossing the border into Honduras, thereby providing a pretext for Honduras' military-dominated government to move against the Sandinistas with the support or even participation of the United States.

Already the covert war is having a serious negative effect in the movement of Sandinista policies away from pluralism toward greater limitations on political parties and in tighter government controls and censorship of non-Sandinista media. Support or opposition to the covert war has become a litmus test of citizenship, and those who fail to take the government's side are cast as enemies of the revolution. The political freedom and the civil liberties ostensibly supported by the Reagan Administration are thus being subverted by the very policies that it promotes.

The Sandinistas have found a rallying point in the external attack, blaming the same "Yankee imperialists" who occupied Nicaragua for decades and who long supported the oppressive Somoza regime. In Managua we attended a political rally commemorating the return of a construction brigade that had been building telephone lines out to the remote Atlantic coast. Six workers from the state telecommunications agency had been killed during *contra* attacks against their brigade. The impassioned speech of Interior Minister Tomas Borge was met by equally impassioned shouts from the crowd vowing to keep Nicaraguan soil untainted by *contras*.

By providing the support for *contra* attacks, the Reagan Administration has played into the hands of the Sandinista government by strengthening Nicaraguan nationalism, a force as potent as revolutionary *sandinismo* itself.

We are at a critical juncture in our relations with Nicaragua.

This week the House of Representatives is debating legislation to terminate the covert action against Nicaragua. If Congress fails to halt this illegal and counterproductive war, it will have given the Administration a green light to intensify covert action against the Sandinistas. The consequences for the United States are grave and far-reaching, holding out the probability of years of involvement, billions of dollars in costs and the likely involvement of U.S. troops.

Last week the Sandinistas came forward with a negotiating proposal that addresses some concerns at the top of the U.S. agenda: an end to the arms flow to Salvadoran guerrillas; a non-aggression pact between Nicaragua and Honduras and a prohibition on foreign military bases in Central America. Although this agenda may not address all our concerns, the Nicaraguan government deserves a more sincere response from the Reagan Administration than expanded naval maneuvers and a multiplication of military aid to the *contras*.

If the Administration is sincere in its desire to alter the Sandinistas' behavior, it must engage the Nicaraguans in a dialogue for peace. Failure to do so would only confirm what many have concluded about the Administration's real purpose: the overthrow of a sovereign government. The consequences of that policy would spell disaster for Nicaragua, for U.S. interests in Central America and for the American people.

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